

Luke 19-23, selected passages
Palm/Passion Sunday, Year C

Wesley UCA 10:30 a.m.
28/03/10

Stony Places

Almost three weeks ago, while just innocently minding my own business walking to an appointment in Belconnen, I ‘dashed my foot against a stone’ (as the Bible says)--my right foot to be precise. I tripped and lost my balance. I felt no panic, sure that I could simply regain balance by firmly planting my left foot on the concrete footpath and shifting my not inconsiderable weight to that side. This would have been fine--except for the fact the footpath was littered with loose gravel. With that move my left foot immediately slid out from underneath me...and I fell, hard (*very* hard), onto the concrete and gravel, landing on both knees and both hands. (Is everybody wincing? I won’t go on then into the further details of injuries, shock, tears and extreme vulnerability.)

Now I’m telling you about this unfortunate incident in my life for two reasons: firstly, please forgive me for not shaking hands today with my right hand as it is still sore from the sprain and bruising; and, secondly, please note that I know a thing or two about *stony places*. I seek to establish my credibility in this way to speak of Luke’s version of the last week in Jesus life by drawing your attention to Luke’s unique imagery of *stones*.

Stones were, of course a common part of daily life in ancient times--and thus a common way to describe various aspects of life. But Luke particularly emphasizes this image in his version of the Passion Narrative--nowhere more dramatically than in the first scene of this great drama when, in response to the Pharisees’ criticism of the noise and disruptive behaviour of the crowd welcoming him to Jerusalem, Jesus says: “if these were silent, the *stones* would cry out.” [Luke 19.39] What a pointed description of Jesus’ power and purpose; such that if humans failed to praise him, even inanimate objects of nature would take up the shout.

Fail him people did. To the religious elite who rejected him he prophesied a destruction that many believe was fulfilled in 70 A.D. when the Temple was destroyed: “they will not leave within you one *stone* upon another; because you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God,” he said. [Luke 19.44]

When some tried to defend the traditions, rituals and social priorities of the

Temple, describing the “beautiful *stones* and gifts dedicated to God,” Jesus again said: “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one *stone* will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.” [Luke 21.5-6]

Telling a parable that indicated he knew of a conspiracy to kill him, Jesus warns his enemies with a reference to Psalm 118:

“the *stone* that the builders rejected has become the *cornerstone*.
Everyone who falls on that *stone* will be broken to pieces,
and *it* will crush anyone on whom it falls.” [Luke 20.17-18]

His language could hardly have been more pointed, and his meaning was not missed by the chief priests and scribes who wanted to do him harm. But they were put off by the crowds of people who were, at that time, still hanging on Jesus’ every word and eager to follow him. Unfortunately it was not long before the praise shouts had turned to angry threats, the crowd evaporating into the shadows of their religious and political apathy. Then the enemies of God had little to fear.

As his closest disciples fell asleep (Luke kindly says because of their grief), unable to stick with him through the agonizing night of approaching betrayal, Jesus withdrew from them “about a *stone’s* throw” and knelt down to pray in solitude. On the Mount of Olives--which was not a lovely garden as we might imagine but rather a *rocky* outcrop overlooking part of the city--Jesus knelt there on the *stony* ground and prayed that the trials he feared would not come to him--nor to his sleepy friends. [Luke 22.30-46] But, not immune from human treachery, the trials did come.

After the abruptly aborted session with King Herod, Pilate, in a clumsy effort to negotiate a kind of ‘plea bargain,’ tells the growing anti-Jesus protesters that Jesus “has done nothing to deserve death” and says: “I will therefore have him *flogged* and release him.” [Luke 23. 15-16] More *stones* to be found here, I’m afraid, for the researching reader: the flogging whips of the time had *stones* and small bits of metal tied into them in order to inflict something like the kind of cruel cutting and abrasive injuries I got on that gravely footpath.

And then when Pilate did what he knew was the wrong thing because his short-term popularity apparently depended on it, Jesus was led out to another of Jerusalem’s *stony* outcrops--the place called The Skull--where he died. Not because he *had* to out of some absurdly indefensibly cruel divine plan of salvation--but because he had to in order to silence the raging crowds. And

just before our minds move to criticise that ancient society for its injustice, duplicity and insincerity--let us note how quickly in our own world today praise and hope can turn to rage and disillusionment. We need look no further than the U.S.--or perhaps even closer to home.

But if we believe--as I do--that God intervened in that sad story of long ago when hearts turned to stone and Jesus died: intervened as God always does to bring redemption out of injustice,
hope out of despair,
healing out of pain,
even life out of death;

then we still have reason to rejoice and be glad this day, and throughout this Holy Week.

The plan of salvation is not essentially about Jesus nor anyone else dying, it is about us all going on living no matter what happens. The story of Jesus gives us the best possible description of this eternal truth, remembering that Luke tells us that Jesus was "laid in a *rock-hewn* tomb" [Luke 23.53] and then, two days later, the women disciples "found the *stone* rolled away." [Luke 24.2]

May all the *stony places* of our lives bring us opportunities to experience God's grace.